The theory takes root

—"Is it you?"

By the time they left the museum, the sun was turning orange.

"Thank you for spending the time with me," Nut said as they walked toward the exit. "I wasn't expecting to have company, but I'm glad you were there."

"Me too," Est said. And he meant it. But underneath the truth was the question. Always the question. Is it you?

Est sat at his kitchen counter, staring at his untouched espresso. The coffee had gone cold twenty minutes ago, but he hadn't noticed. His mind was somewhere else entirely—replaying a loop of memories, observations, fragments of possibility.

The question had been living in Est's chest for weeks now. This persistent, nagging wondering about whether Nut could be the person from that night. The person who had touched him with reverence. With care. Like Est was something precious instead of something to be used.

Nut's hands. The way they moved with such precision and care. The way he touched things—bottles, surfaces, people—with intention. Est's own memory was still blurred—alcohol-soaked, protective amnesia keeping the details fuzzy—but certain sensations had stayed sharp: careful hands, a voice asking permission, the feeling of being seen as a whole person rather than a collection of parts. The sense that whoever had touched him that night had done so with reverence.

What if it was Nut?

The thought had arrived days ago and had been growing ever since, spreading roots through Est's mind, consuming all the space that used to be occupied by other worries. The evidence stacked itself neatly: Nut was a tattoo artist with trained, precise hands. Nut treated bodies with respect. Nut had been kind to Est from the beginning, welcoming him. And the unfinished tattoo—the botanical skeleton—Nut created unfinished work all the time.

It made sense. It fit. The pieces aligned.

But Est needed to be sure.

So he started watching. Observing. Studying. Looking for the moment of recognition that would tell him: yes, this is him, this is the answer.

What Est didn't realize was how his observation looked from the outside. How his quiet intensity, his careful attention, his constant presence could be mistaken for

something else entirely.

Est had texted Nut that morning: Can I stop by today? Just to hang out?

Nut had replied within minutes: Of course. Come anytime. I'll make coffee.

Now Est was sitting on one of the tall stools near Nut's workstation, watching as Nut prepared for an afternoon client. The studio smelled like it always did—cold espresso and green soap and the expensive sandalwood incense that Nut burned during sessions. The late afternoon light came through the tall windows, turning everything warm and golden.

Nut was wearing his usual studio uniform: dark canvas apron over a soft gray henley, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, revealing the small tattoos that decorated his forearms—tiny, delicate designs that looked like they'd been placed with surgical precision.

Est watched those hands.

"You're quiet today," Nut observed, glancing up from his prep work. His dark eyes were warm, concerned. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Est said quickly. "Just thinking."

"About anything specific?" Nut asked.

About whether your hands are the ones I remember. About whether you're the answer I've been looking for. About whether this feeling in my chest is recognition or just wishful thinking.

"Nothing important." Est said instead.

Nut nodded, accepting the deflection without pressing. He crossed to the espresso machine. He pulled two shots, poured them into small ceramic cups, and handed one to Est. Their fingers brushed during the transfer. Brief. Accidental. Est's heart did a strange skip. Was that recognition? Did that touch feel familiar? Or am I just projecting what I want to feel?

He couldn't tell. The memory was still too blurred, too protected by his brain's defense mechanisms.

"Thanks." Est said, wrapping his hands around the warm cup.

"You've been coming by a lot lately," Nut observed, leaning against the counter. Not accusatory, just stating a fact. "Not that I mind. I like the company. But I want to make sure you're okay. You seem—" He paused, searching for the right word.

Est's chest tightened. He knows. He can see it.

"I'm fine," Est said, his voice automatically shifting into the calm, controlled register he used when he needed to hide. "I just like it here. It's quiet. Peaceful. No pressure to be anything." He stopped himself before he said myself.

"I get that." Nut finished gently.

They drank their coffee in comfortable silence. Est studied the way Nut held his cup—both hands wrapped around it, like he was absorbing the warmth. Before Est could process the thought further, his phone buzzed.

Group Chat - The Chaos

Hong: Anyone want to grab lunch?

Tui: Can't. On the way to university.

William: Working on a project. Maybe later this week?

Lego: I'm free! Where?

Hong: The usual place. 1 PM?

Lego: See you there!

Est stared at the messages. Hong's name triggered something, a flash of memory from the warehouse party, from the rooftop, from moments when Hong had been kind and sarcastic and real in ways that made Est feel less alone. But lately, Hong had been different. Colder. More distant. The sarcasm had turned sharp, cutting, like Hong was wielding it as a weapon instead of a shield.

Est didn't understand why.

"Everything okay?" Nut asked, noticing Est's expression.

"Yeah," Est said, setting his phone down. "Just the group chat."

Nut smiled. "Hong's in a good mood today. That's nice to see. He's been—" He paused, choosing his words carefully. "—off lately. Stressed, I think. He won't talk about it."

"Do you know why?" Est asked.

Nut shook his head. "Hong doesn't share when something's bothering him. He just disappears into his music and his work and pretends everything's fine until it actually is. Or until it gets so bad he can't hide it anymore."

Est came back the next day. And the day after that.

Each time, Nut welcomed him. Made coffee. Talked about art and the specific satisfaction of creating something permanent. Showed Est sketches of upcoming tattoos, explained his process, invited Est into his creative world with the generosity of someone who had no hidden agenda. And each time, Est watched. Studied. Compared the way Nut moved, spoke, touched things to the fragmentary memories that lived in his body but not his conscious mind.

The fixation was growing. Consuming. Est knew it was becoming unhealthy—this obsession with solving the mystery, with finding the answer, with turning the blurry night into something concrete and known. But he couldn't stop. The not-knowing was worse than the searching.

Hong lay on his bed, staring at his phone. The group chat was active—Lego sending photos of a new nail design, William sharing a photography article, Nut asking if anyone wanted to come to the studio tomorrow.

And then:

Est: I'll stop by if that's okay.

Nut: Always okay. Come whenever.

Hong's jaw tightened.

Always okay. Come whenever.

Est had been going to Nut's studio almost every day for the past week. Hong had noticed. Hong noticed everything.

At first, he'd told himself it was fine. Est was new to the group, still finding his place, still figuring out where he belonged. Nut was being welcoming. But something had shifted. The visits were becoming more frequent. The conversations were lasting longer. And when Hong went to the studio—on the rare occasions he could force himself to go, to face the complicated knot of feelings that lived in his chest whenever he was near Nut—he could feel it.

The intimacy. The quiet comfort.

It looked like the beginning of something.

And Hong—Hong couldn't bear it.

He'd been avoiding the studio. Avoiding Nut. Throwing himself into work and music and anything that would keep his mind busy and his heart numb. He'd been ignoring texts, declining calls, building walls so high that even Lego was having trouble scaling them. But avoidance only worked for so long.

Eventually, you had to face the thing you were running from.

Hong showed up unannounced. He'd been avoiding this moment for days, but the pull was too strong. The need to see Nut, to be in his space, to reclaim some piece of what they used to have—it overrode the fear.

When Hong pushed open the heavy metal door, the familiar smell hit him immediately: cold espresso, green soap, sandalwood incense. Home. Or what used to feel like home, back when things were simpler, back when Hong's feelings were secret but safe.

Nut looked up from his workstation, and his face broke into a smile. "Hong. Hey. I wasn't expecting you."

"I was in the area," Hong said, his voice carefully casual. He tossed his keys onto the counter—the familiar clink of silver against stone. "Thought I'd stop by."

But as Hong's eyes adjusted to the dimmer interior light, he saw someone else.

Est. Sitting on one of the tall stools near Nut's desk. Holding a cup of coffee. Looking comfortable. Looking like he belonged.

Hong's chest tightened.

"Oh," Hong said. His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "You have company."

"Est just stopped by," Nut said easily. "We were talking about—what were we talking about?"

"Tattoo aftercare," Est said quietly. His eyes flicked to Hong, then away. Like he could sense the sudden shift in temperature.

"Exciting," Hong said flatly.

The silence that followed was uncomfortable. Heavy. Nut looked between them, his expression shifting from welcome to confusion to something that looked like worry.

"You okay?" Nut asked Hong. "You seem—"

"I'm fine," Hong interrupted. "Just tired. Long day."

"Want coffee?" Nut offered.

"No," Hong said. Too quickly. "I'm fine. I just—" He looked at Est again. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not interrupting." Nut said.

But it felt like interruption. It felt like walking into a space that had been occupied by two people and becoming the unwelcome third. The outsider in a room that used to feel like his.

Hong picked up his keys. "I should go."

"You just got here." Nut said, frowning.

"I remembered I have—" Hong's mind went blank. "—a thing. A work thing. I'll catch you later."

And then he left. Fast. Before Nut could ask more questions. Before the tightness in his chest could turn into something visible.

That night. Group chat.

Nut: Phone was dead all afternoon. Sorry I missed your calls.

Hong: No worries. Next time.

Hong stared at the screen, his thumb hovering over the keyboard. He wanted to ask: Was Est there when I called? Were you with him while I was standing outside your apartment like an idiot, holding tickets to a museum you ended up visiting with someone else?

But he didn't ask. Asking would reveal too much. Would crack the armor he'd spent years building. So he just set his phone down and stared at the ceiling, letting the jealousy and hurt swirl in his chest like smoke.

It happened in the group chat. Casual. Accidental. The kind of small moment that changes everything.

Est: Thanks again for the museum recommendation, Nut. I didn't know anatomy could be that beautiful.

Nut: Glad you enjoyed it. I've been wanting to see that exhibit for months.

William: What museum?

Est: The anatomy exhibition at the contemporary museum. Nut and I went a few days ago. Spent the whole afternoon there. It was amazing.

Hong read the message three times.

The whole afternoon.

Not a quick visit. Not a coincidental encounter. The whole afternoon. But when Hong had asked, when Hong had shown up at the studio and mentioned his dead phone, Nut had said—what? That he'd run into Est? That it was brief? The memory was hazy, filtered through Hong's own discomfort, but he was certain Nut had downplayed it.

Had made it sound like nothing.

When it had been the whole afternoon.

Hong's hands were shaking. He set the phone down before he threw it.

The timeline assembled itself in his mind with brutal clarity: While Hong was calling Nut's dead phone. While Hong was standing outside Nut's empty apartment, holding tickets, feeling stupid. While Hong was crying on Lego's bed, wearing borrowed pajamas, feeling like everything he touched turned to ash—

Nut and Est had been together. At the museum. Having the quiet, intimate afternoon that Hong had planned. Building the connection that Hong wanted.

And Nut hadn't told him.

Nut had lied. By omission, by minimization, by making it sound like it didn't matter. But it did matter. It mattered so much that Hong felt like he couldn't breathe.

Hong arrived without warning. Again. But this time, the casualness was gone. Replaced by something sharp and volatile and barely contained. When he pushed open the door, Nut was alone. Cleaning up after a client, the smell of green soap heavy in the air.

"Hong," Nut said, surprised. "Twice in one week. I'm honored."

"Why did you lie to me?" Hong asked. No preamble. Inside his chest, a heavy, suffocating weight was crushing him.

Nut stopped what he was doing. Looked up. "What?"

"About the museum. You said you ran into Est. Made it sound like nothing. But Est said you spent the whole afternoon together."

Nut's expression shifted. Understanding. Then guilt. "Hong—"

"So which is it?" Hong's voice was quiet. Controlled. But underneath was a current of hurt so strong it made his hands shake. "Was it nothing, or was it the whole afternoon?"

Nut set down the spray bottle he'd been holding. Took a breath. "It was longer than I

said. But I didn't lie to hurt you. I just—I knew you'd been planning to go. I didn't want to make you feel worse by—"

"By what?" Hong interrupted. "By admitting you had a nice time with someone else while I was alone feeling like shit?"

"That's not—" Nut started.

"Then what is it, Nut?" Hong's voice was rising now, the control slipping. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're spending a lot of time with Est. Making him coffee. Taking him to museums. Treating him like he's—"

"Like what?"

"Like he's special."

The words hung between them. Heavy. True.

While his heart was breaking, they were learning about each other.

Nut moved toward Hong. "Hong. Est is a friend. That's all. He's struggling. He's new to the group. I'm trying to help him feel welcome. That's what we do. We take care of each other."

"You take care of him," Hong corrected. "Not me. Not anymore."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it?" Hong laughed—bitter, hollow. "When's the last time you asked me to go somewhere? When's the last time you made plans with me?"

Nut was quiet. Because Hong was right. And they both knew it.

Before either of them could say anything else, the door opened. Est walked in, looking surprised to see them both there. "Sorry—I didn't know you had—" He stopped. The temperature in the room was arctic. The tension visible. "I should go." Est said quickly.

"No," Hong said. His voice was sharp. "Stay. I was just leaving."

"Hong—" Nut started.

But Hong was already at the door. He looked back once—at Nut, then at Est—and something in his expression made Est's stomach drop.

It was hurt. Raw. Unguarded.

And then Hong was gone.

The door swung shut. The sound echoed. Nut stood there, shoulders tight, looking

lost in his own space. Est stood frozen by the entrance, his mind racing. What just happened? What did I do?

Est came back. He didn't know why. Maybe because running away felt like admitting guilt for something he didn't understand. Maybe because he needed answers. Nut was there. Working on a design. He looked tired. Like he hadn't slept.

"Est," Nut said. Not unwelcoming, but cautious. "Hey."

"Is Hong okay?" Est asked.

Nut sighed. Set down his pencil. "Honestly? I don't know. He's not answering my calls."

"Is it because of me?"

"No," Nut said firmly. "It's because of—" He stopped. "It's complicated. Hong has a lot of history. A lot of things he doesn't talk about. And I think—I think seeing us spend time together triggered something."

"What kind of something?" Est asked.

Before Nut could answer, the door opened again.

Hong walked in. His silver hair was messier than usual. His eyes were bloodshot, rimmed with red. He looked like he hadn't slept either. And when he saw Est sitting there, on the stool, looking comfortable in Nut's space, something in Hong's expression hardened.

"Of course you're here," Hong said.

"Hong—" Nut started.

"I tried to call you," Hong said to Nut, ignoring Est entirely.

"I was working," Nut said. "I had clients all day. I'm sorry."

"Were you working?" Hong asked. "Or were you busy with—" He gestured vaguely at Est. "—other things?"

"Hong, that's not fair," Nut said. His voice was still calm, still trying to anchor, but there was frustration underneath now. "Est and I are friends. Just like you and I are friends. There's nothing—"

It looked like Nut was defending Est.

It looked like Nut was choosing Est.

It looked like Est had already won.

"Don't," Hong interrupted. His voice was sharp. Cold. "Don't compare us. You and I are not the same as you and him."

Est stood up from the stool, his hands sliding into his pockets. "I think I should leave."

"Good idea," Hong said.

"Hong!" Nut's voice was sharp now. "Stop it. Est hasn't done anything wrong."

"Hasn't he?" Hong looked at Est directly for the first time. "You come here almost every day. You sit in his space. You drink his coffee. You look at him like—" Hong stopped himself. Swallowed hard. "Like you want something."

Est's chest tightened. "I don't—"

"Of course you don't," Hong said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You're just the innocent new guy. The fragile model we all have to protect. Right, Nut? We have to make sure Est feels safe. Even if it means lying to the people who actually know you."

"I didn't mean to lie," Nut said. His voice was strained now, the calm cracking. "I was trying to protect your feelings. I knew you'd been planning to go to the museum. I didn't want to make it worse by—"

"By telling me the truth?" Hong laughed. Bitter. Broken. "That's great, Nut. Really great. Lie to me to protect me. That's exactly what I need."

"Hong, please—" Nut stepped forward, trying to close the distance.

Hong stepped back. "Don't."

"Let me explain—"

"There's nothing to explain," Hong said. His voice had dropped to something quiet. Dangerous. "I get it. You have a new project. A new person to fix. I'm just—" He swallowed. "I'm just in the way."

"That's not true," Nut said. Desperate now. "Hong, you're not—"

"Save it," Hong interrupted. "I've heard enough apologies from people I trust. I'm tired of listening. I don't need your explanations. I don't need your pity. I just need —" He stopped. Because what he needed, he couldn't say. Not here. Not with Est watching. Not with his armor cracked and his heart visible. "I need to go," Hong finished.

And he left.

The door slammed. The sound reverberated. Est and Nut stood in the sudden silence, the weight of what had just happened settling over them like ash.

"I'm sorry," Est said quietly.

"It's not your fault," Nut replied. But his voice was hollow. Unconvincing.

Est didn't know what to say. Didn't know how to fix this. Didn't know how his search for answers had turned into this—a fracture, a wound, a friendship breaking apart in front of him.

Hong made it halfway down the hallway before the tears started. He pressed his back against the cool concrete wall, his hands shaking, his breath coming in short gasps. The jealousy and hurt and years of unspoken feelings were crushing his chest, making it impossible to breathe.

He needed to leave. Needed to get out of this building, this neighborhood, this situation. He pushed off the wall and kept walking—fast, desperate, his boots loud against the concrete. But he didn't make it far. He bit the inside of his cheek hard enough to taste blood.

Standing right there in the corridor, frozen in place, was Lego. Lego's hand was buried in his black bag, searching for keys. The sudden sound of Hong's approach made him look up, and his wide eyes went even wider. The sudden, explosive opening of the door made him jump.

"P'Hong?" Lego's voice was soft. Worried.

Hong couldn't answer. His throat was too tight. He just pushed past Lego without a word, needing to escape, needing air, needing anything but this. Lego stood there, paralyzed. Then slowly turned to look back at the studio door, which was still ajar.

Through the gap, he could see Est and Nut. Both looking shattered. Both standing in the wreckage of whatever had just happened. And Lego's eyes filled with tears. He stood trapped in the doorway—caught between following Hong and staying with Nut. Between the person falling apart and the person trying to hold things together.

"You don't need to follow him, Lego," Nut said gently, appearing in the doorway. "It was just an argument. Hong will be fine. He just needs space."

Nut genuinely believed his own words. He wanted to protect Lego from getting caught in the crossfire of a messy situation. He wanted to protect him from the complicated history that he didn't even know existed.

Lego looked at Nut. For a second, he almost believed it. For a second—just one second—he wanted to believe those words. He wanted to step inside the warm, safe studio. He wanted to sit down and let Nut take care of everything. Let Nut fix this. Let Nut be the steady anchor that he always was. But then he thought about the

museum tickets. The tear he'd wiped away. The way Hong had looked when he said everything always went wrong. He thought about the raw, silent tear he had wiped away from Hong's face just last night. The way Hong had confessed, completely stripped of his armor, that he felt like everything always went wrong for him.

Nut was steady. Nut would be okay.

But Hong wouldn't.

He didn't look at Est, who was still watching from the stool.

"I'm sorry, P'Nut." Lego said softly. "But I have to go."

And then he ran. He was desperate to catch up to Hong.

Lego didn't go back home. He took a taxi straight to Hong's apartment, his fingers gripping the hem of his gray skirt tightly the whole way. His mind was racing. His heart was pounding.

Lego pounded on the door. "Hongshi! I know you're in there, Please open up."

Silence. Long. Agonizing. Then the deadbolt clicked.

The door opened. Hong stood there looking wrecked—silver hair a mess, eyes red and swollen, face pale and drawn. He didn't say anything. Just turned and walked back into the dark apartment. Lego followed. Closed the door softly behind him.

Hong was already on the sofa, sitting on the edge, elbows on knees, staring at nothing.

Without a word, Lego walked over and sat down right next to him. Lego sat beside him. Pulled out a lighter and the pack of cigarettes from the coffee table. Lit one for Hong. Lit one for himself. They sat in silence, smoking, the ritual grounding them. Two thin, gray ribbons of smoke curled toward the ceiling, filling the space between them with a bitter, familiar haze.

Finally, Hong spoke. "I must look incredibly pathetic to you right now." He let his head fall back against the sofa cushions, a hollow, bitter laugh escaping his throat.

"You don't look pathetic," Lego said softly. "You just look like you're hurting."

Hong closed his eyes. He couldn't perform being okay anymore. The mask was gone. Laughed—hollow, bitter. "It's Nut. It's always been Nut."

Lego didn't interrupt. Just listened.

"When we were fifteen," Hong started, his voice cracking, "we were at boarding

school together. We had this—this secret. Just us. Nobody knew. It was the only time in my life I didn't have to perform. Nut was my first love, Lego." He took a shaky breath. "But my mother found out. She didn't understand. She thought it was wrong. Shameful. She forced us apart. Took me to China. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

A tear slipped down Hong's cheek.

"That's when I built the Rebel. I figured if I was sarcastic and impossible to reach, nobody could hurt me again. Nobody could force me out, because I'd already be standing at the exit. If I made myself sharp enough, dangerous enough, untouchable enough—nobody could hurt me the way my mother hurt me. The way losing Nut hurt me. But when I see Nut with Est—" His voice broke. "It makes me feel fifteen again. Like I was never enough."

Lego wrapped his arms around Hong, pulling him close. Hong buried his face in Lego's shoulder, clinging to him, letting everything crumble.

"You are enough," Lego whispered fiercely. "You've always been enough, This wasn't about you not being enough. This was about your mother being cruel and both of you being too young to fight back."

"It makes me feel like the universe is telling me that I was never enough to keep him. That I was never the right kind of person for him to love. That the one piece of real honesty I ever had was just a dream. Just something I made up in my head because I was lonely and desperate and scared." Hong said, the words coming faster now, the pain spilling out like a broken dam.

They sat like that for a long time. Finally, Hong pulled back. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Don't tell the others. About me and Nut. I don't want Tui and William to know. And I definitely don't want Est to know. I just—I want to keep it private." Hong's voice was steady now. Controlled. Back in the zone where he could function, even if he was still bleeding underneath. "I don't want them to see me like this. Broken. Jealous. Holding onto something from the past. I don't want them to know about the boarding school or my mother or—any of it. I need to keep something private. Something that's just mine."

"I promise," Lego said finally. "Your story is yours. I won't tell anyone."

Hong nodded. Closed his eyes. Let himself be held. He just sat there, smoking his cigarette, watching the city lights start to turn on as the sun disappeared.